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# *Economic Inequality and Political Representation*

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Larry M. Bartels

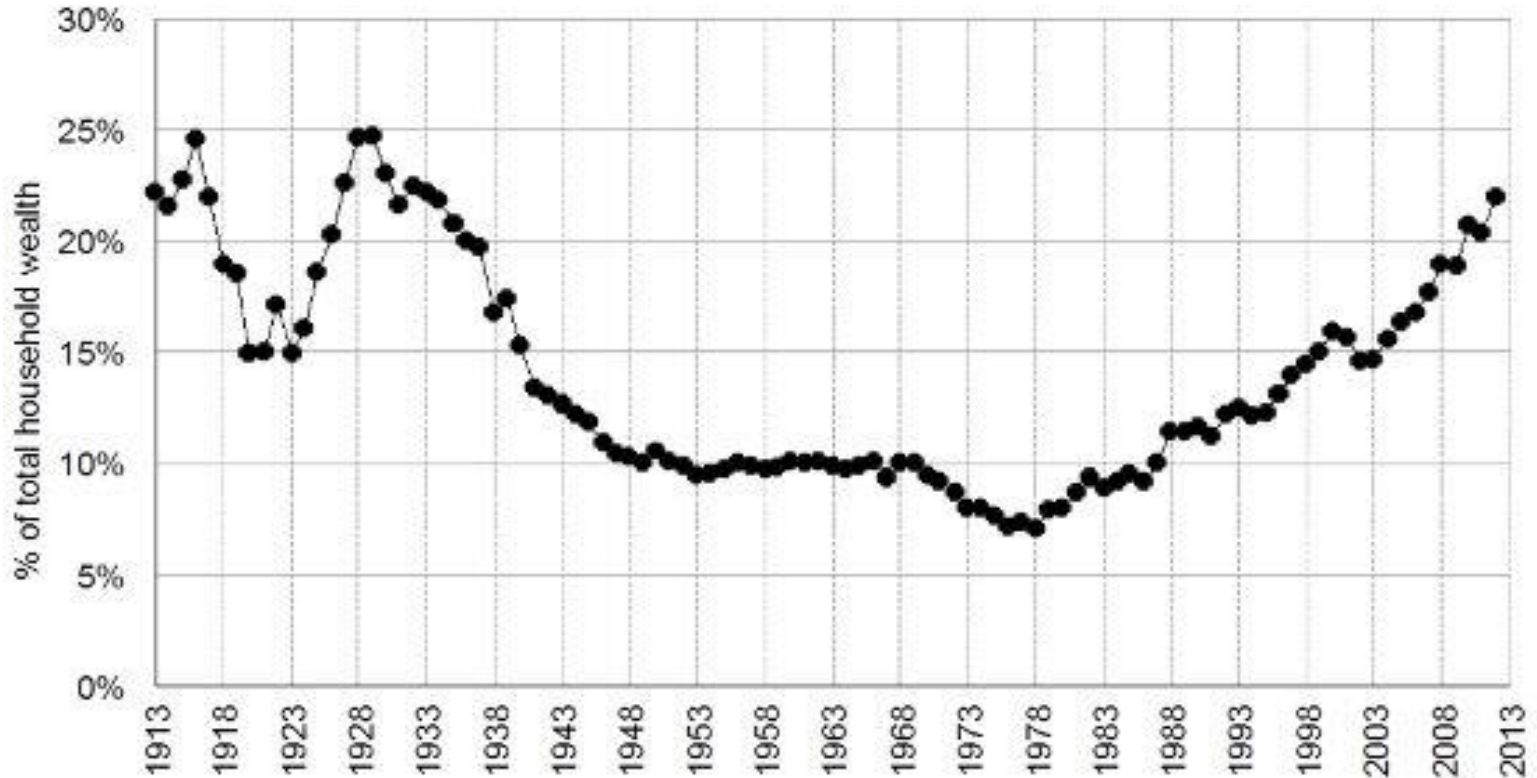
Vanderbilt University

“I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.”

— Robert Dahl (1971)



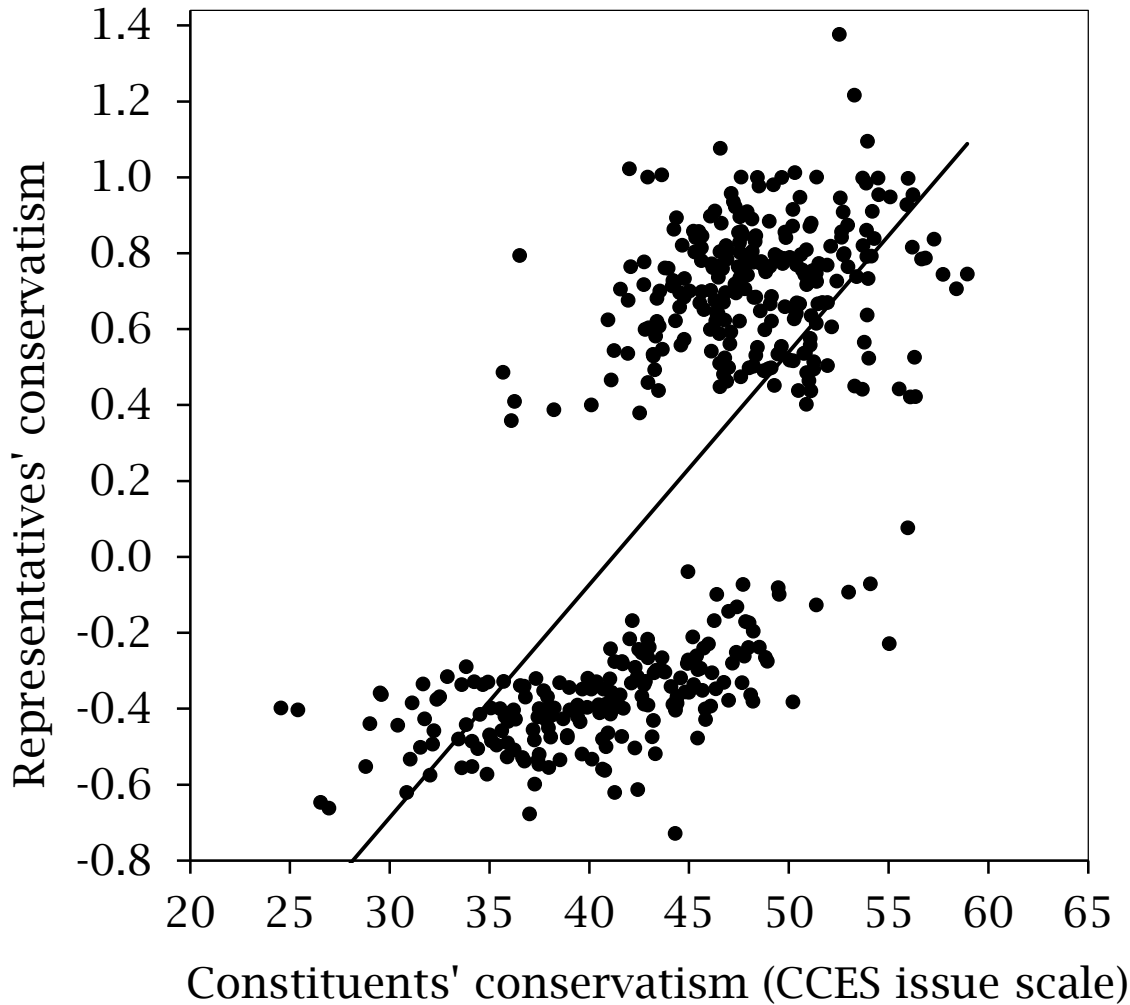
*Can* citizens be “considered as political equals” despite enormous disparities in income and wealth?



**Share of total U.S. wealth owned by top 0.1% of families**

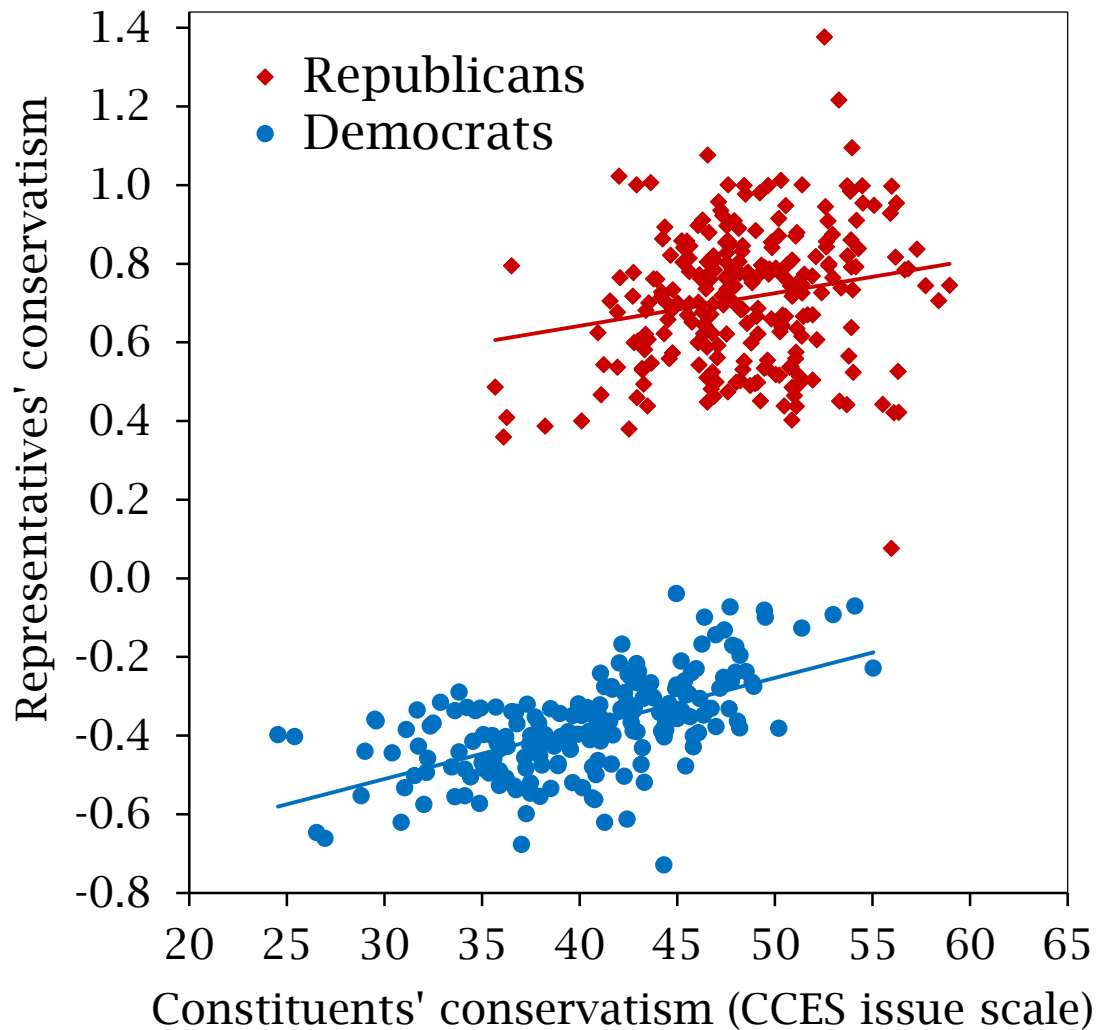
Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman (2014),  
“Wealth Inequality in the United States since 1913.”

## Constituency Opinion and Representatives' Roll Call Votes, 2011-2013



Representatives' voting records are strongly correlated with their constituents' preferences—"a sanguine picture of democracy at work" (Robert Shapiro)

## Constituency Opinion and Representatives' Roll Call Votes, 2011-2013

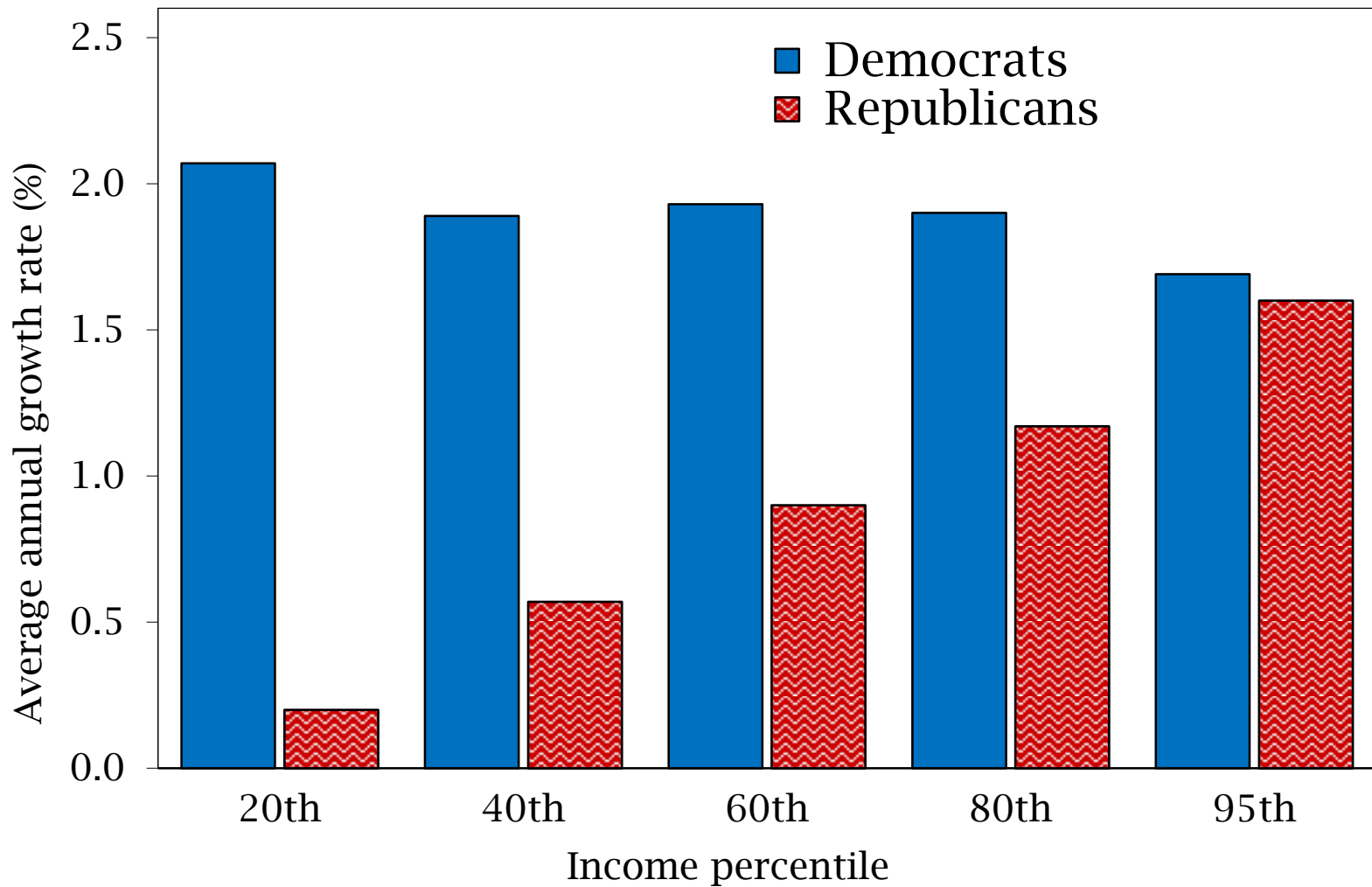


But this relationship mostly reflects the substantial gulf between parties—and moderate districts get vastly different representation if they happen to replace a Democrat with a Republican or vice versa.

## Some Examples: Congressional Support for President Obama's Major Policy Initiatives, by Party

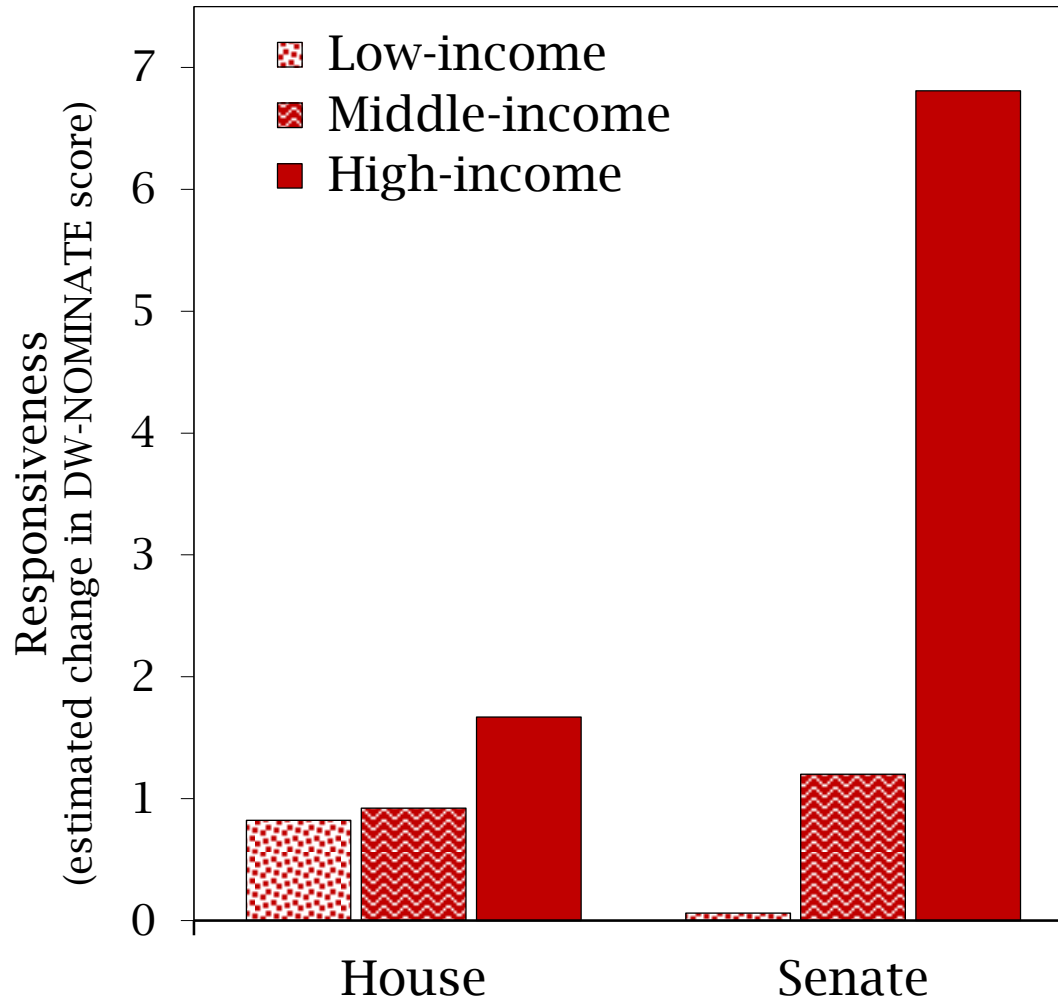
	<b>Democrats</b>	<b>Republicans</b>
2009 fiscal stimulus package	302-11	3-214
2010 Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare")	280-32	0-214
2010 Dodd-Frank financial regulation	291-20	6-211
2014 minimum wage increase (filibustered)	53-1	1-41

## The Result: Real Income Growth by Income Level under Democratic and Republican Presidents, 1948-2013



# Congressional Responsiveness to Income Groups, 2011-2013

(DW-NOMINATE Scores)

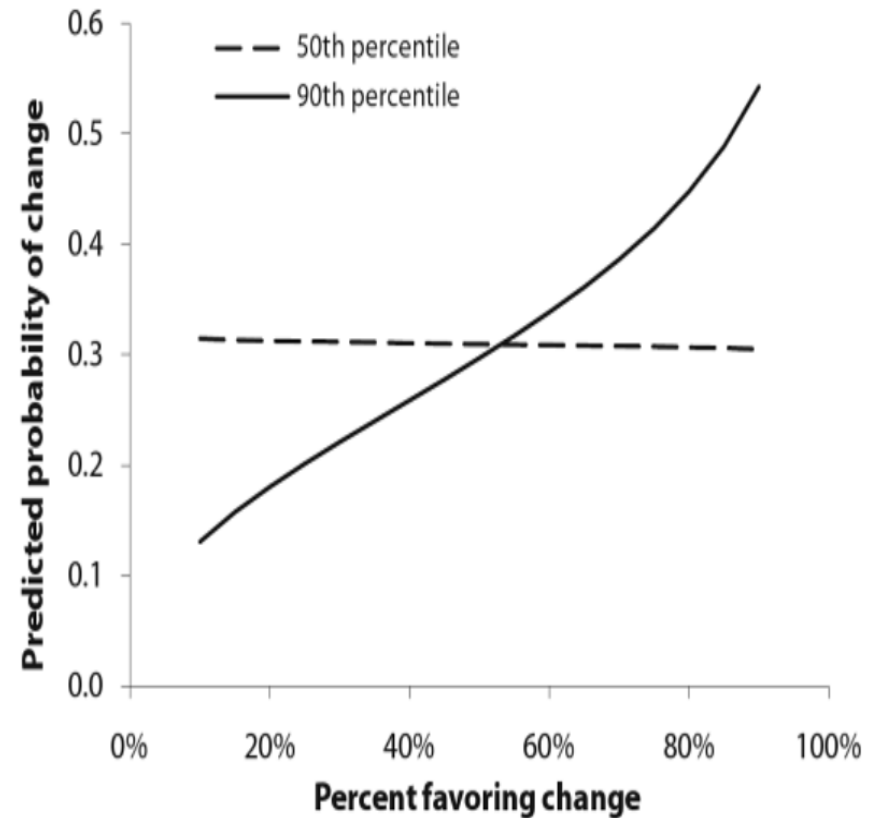
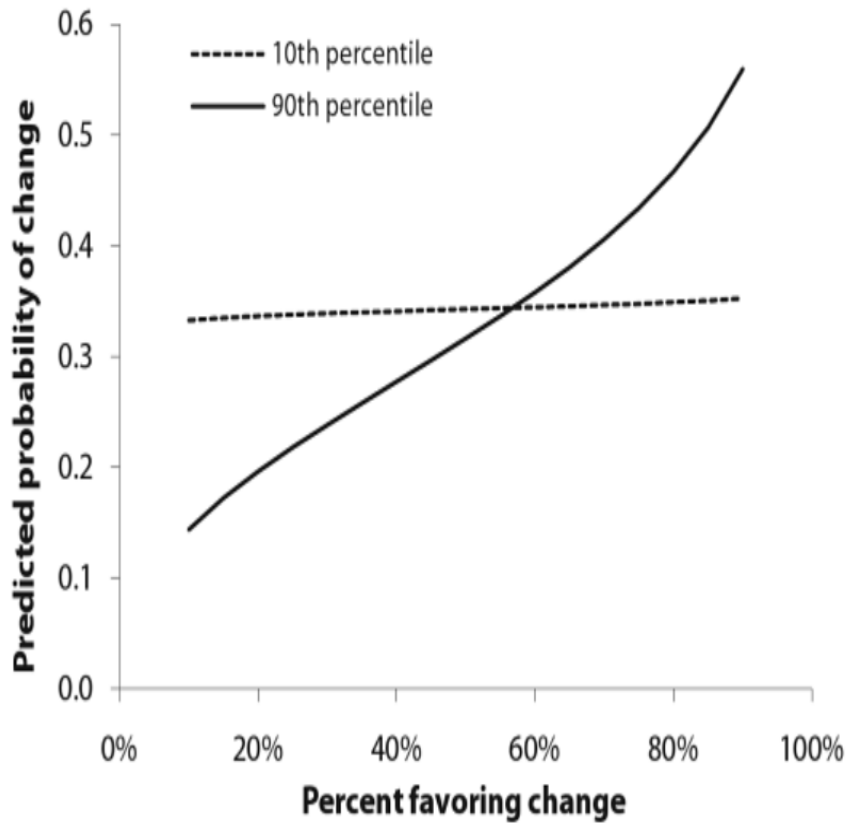


When elected officials *are* responsive to the preferences of constituents, responsiveness seems to be highly unequal—especially in the Senate.



# Policy Responsiveness When Preferences of Income Groups Diverge, 1981-2002

Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence* (2013)



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## Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans

Benjamin I. Page, Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright  
(*Perspectives on Politics*, 2013)

Based on 2011 Survey of Economically Successful Americans  
Chicago-area pilot study (N=83)

<b>Household wealth</b>	<b>% of sample</b>
< \$5 million	27%
\$5-10 million	37%
\$10-20 million	14%
\$20-40 million	14%
> \$40 million	8%

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## (Some) Contrasting Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans and the General Public

	<b>Wealthy support</b>	<b>General public</b>
Spend whatever is necessary to ensure that all children have really good public schools	35%	87%
The federal government should make sure that everyone who wants to go to college can do so	28%	78%
Favor national health insurance, financed by tax money, paying for most forms of health care	32%	61%
Invest more in worker retraining and education to help workers adapt to changes in the economy	30%	57%
Willing to pay more taxes in order to provide health coverage for everyone	41%	59%

## (Some More) Contrasting Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans and the General Public

	<b>Wealthy support</b>	<b>General public</b>
See to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job	19%	68%
Minimum wage high enough so that no family with a full-time worker falls below official poverty line	40%	78%
The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	23%	50%
Favor cuts in domestic programs like Medicare, education, and highways in order to cut federal budget deficits	58%	27%
Differences in income in America are too large	62%	63%

# A Test Case: The Policy Response to the Wall Street Meltdown



The Rescue Plan



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One likely mechanism:

“In the first seven months of Geithner’s tenure, his calendars reflect at least 80 contacts with Blankfein [CEO of Goldman Sachs], Dimon [CEO of JP Morgan], Citigroup Chairman Richard Parsons or Citigroup CEO Vikram Pandit.”

— *Associated Press*  
(October 2009)



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“The list of phone calls is not the largest banks, because some of the biggest are hardly represented (e.g., Wells Fargo), it’s not the most troubled banks (e.g., Bank of America had little contact), and it’s not even investment banker-types who were central to the most stressed markets (Morgan Stanley was not in the inner loop). ... Geithner’s phone calls were primarily to and from people he knew well already—who had cultivated a relationship with him over the years, shared nonprofit board memberships, and participated in the same social activities. These are close professional colleagues and in some cases, presumably, friends.”

— Simon Johnson (2009)

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Another likely mechanism:

## Top Contributors to Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign (*OpenSecrets.org*)



Rank	Organization	Amount
#2	<i>Goldman Sachs</i>	\$1,034,615
#5	<i>JPMorgan Chase</i>	\$847,895
#7	<i>Citigroup Inc.</i>	\$755,057



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“[W]hat differentiates oligarchy and democracy is wealth or the lack of it. The essential point is that where the possession of political power is due to the possession of economic power or wealth, whether the number of persons be large or small, that is oligarchy, and when the unpropertied class have power, that is democracy.”

— Aristotle  
(4th century B.C.)

